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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000794

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [AM](#)
SUBJECT: TAINTED ELECTION FOR CENTRAL YEREVAN'S PREFECT

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Classified By: Ambassador Marie Yovanovitch, reasons 1.4 (b/d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) On September 28, the controversial incumbent prefect of Yerevan's central district beat his opposition challenger, in a vote marred by numerous reports and eyewitness accounts of fraud that were confirmed by Embassy election observers. The incumbent scored landslide margins in polling stations where ballot-stuffing was reported to have occurred and turnout suspiciously soared to 90 percent, on a rainy day when observed turnout was light. The challenger has rejected the official results as fraud, refused to concede defeat, and is preparing to submit proof of election violations to the Prosecutor General's Office. A Council of Europe election observation mission (EOM) quickly issued a critical initial report of the election. END SUMMARY.

ELECTION OF YEREVAN PREFECT

¶2. (SBU) On September 28, Yerevan held a hotly contested election for the prefect of its Kentron (Central) District that pitted the two-time incumbent prefect from the ruling Republican party against the leader of a once prominent opposition party allied with ex-President Levon Ter-Petrossian. The office of Kentron District prefect might be compared in influence and prominence to being Borough President of Manhattan -- in the Tammany Hall era. District prefects, which could also be translated as community heads or district mayors, have significant power to apportion local government funding in their districts and substantial informal power over local police and businesses. The Kentron District is the most high-profile local government precinct in Yerevan or across Armenia.

OFFICIAL RESULTS

¶3. (SBU) Armenia's Central Election Commission (CEC) announced September 29 that incumbent Gagik Beglarian won over 70 percent of votes cast during the disputed election for the seat of Yerevan's Kentron (Center) District prefect, with his only challenger Ararat Zurabian netting under 26 percent. Voter turnout was reported to be low, just 34.7 percent. (NOTE: Heavy rains on September 27, and some precipitation the morning of the vote was likely one of the culprits behind the low turnout. END NOTE.)

¶4. (SBU) In the CEC's breakdown of Kentron's 54 polling stations, voter turnout was suspiciously high in precincts where ballot-stuffing was reported to have occurred. For example, two of the more questionable precincts reported 88

and 89 percent of voter turnout. This got mention in a September 29 press release issued by a Council of Europe (COE) EOM which noted "disproportionately high turn-out in some instances." (COMMENT: Embassy election observers also detected suspiciously high turnouts in these precincts earlier in the day, when other precincts were reporting much lower numbers. (END COMMENT.)

ELECTION VIOLATIONS ABOUND

14. (C) When one of our emboff teams visited the offices of opposition candidate Ararat Zurabian early in the afternoon, campaign officials said they already had recorded 21 cases of election fraud. These included ballot stuffing, open and multiple voting, vote buying, campaigning on election day, and violence (against proxies, observers, reporters and election commission members from the opposition Heritage party). Some of these reported violations were subsequently confirmed by other proxies and local observers during precinct inspections by emboffs. By the end of election day, the list of Zurabian's alleged election fraud cases had grown to fifty.

15. (C) In three cases of reported ballot-stuffing -- at precincts that are all incidentally located on the outskirts of the Kentron district near the Embassy -- emboffs confirmed ballot-stuffing by unidentified thugs who burst into the precincts in groups of two to three dozen, then proceeded to stuff ballots into the ballot boxes, according to multiple accounts from eyewitnesses as the scene. (COMMENT: Police are usually stationed at polling stations to maintain order. The one policeman we could track down at these precincts acknowledged that an altercation had happened, but he said he

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was "unsure" of what it had been about. It was readily apparent that he had witnessed the incident, but did nothing to intervene. END COMMENT.)

16. (C) Various eyewitness confirmations at these precincts were provided by domestic observers from the Helsinki Committee NGO, It's Your Choice NGO, election proxies, and election commission members. In one polling station, emboff witnessed an older election commission member rebuke a young female proxy for confirming the ballot-stuffing. Upon visual inspection of the ballot box in two precincts, emboff noted signs of ballot-stuffing: neatly stacked bundles of ballots piled against the side of the ballot boxes as though stuffed all at once in a big handful. Election commission officials then tried to shake the ballot boxes to disguise what had apparently taken place. Emboffs and other election observers sponsored by the Council of Europe and the IFES election assistance organization also witnessed irregularities in the vote count.

17. (C) A similar ballot-stuffing incident was reported at a polling station located in the Derzhinskiy primary school, where special forces and police were called in response to a scuffle that had broken out following the incident. When questioned by emboffs, pro-government election commission members were at great pains to downplay what had happened, all denying that ballot-stuffing had occurred. Several of them stated that they "did not understand what was going on" when the incident took place. (NOTE: When emboffs arrived at the school, the half-dozen police and lone special forces representative quickly departed the scene. END NOTE.)

18. (C) Emboffs discovered at every polling station visited individuals who were not wearing their accreditation badges on their clothing in plain sight, or unidentified bystanders without accreditation freely wandering around the premises, talking to election commission members and pro-governmental proxies, while police positioned nearby failed to challenge them. This was also the case during the vote counts we

observed where -- although the election code provides for a complete lockdown of the stations after the closing of the polls -- unidentified individuals clearly in league with ruling party voting officials entered and exited the premises at will, with police looking on. Most of these individuals were reporting by telephone on the vote count as it unfolded.

When questioned by emboffs, two unaccredited individuals lied about their identity and quickly left the scene, again in the presence of police officers who did nothing to prevent their entry or question them about their role at the polling station.

COE CRITICAL OF ELECTION'S CONDUCT

¶9. (C) In addition to registering concern about disproportionately high turn-out in some instances, the COE's EOM also listed other irregularities in its press release. The EOM said it observed "a lack of transparency in both voting and counting procedures" and received reports of vote-buying, multiple voting, and intimidation in polling stations. (COMMENT: One of the Embassy's election observation teams interacted with the COE's delegation head during the vote count at two side-by-side polling stations, where the election code violations previously cited were simultaneously observed. END COMMENT.)

RULING REGIME INCUMBENT BEATS LTP ALLY

¶11. (SBU) The election of Yerevan's Kentron (Center) Community's prefect pitted the two-term incumbent, Gagik Beglarian, of the ruling Republican Party against the oppositionist Ararat Zurabian, the Chairperson of the Armenian National Movement and a former Kentron prefect himself during the 1990s. The election was viewed as a high-stakes contest by Armenia's embattled opposition led by Levon Ter-Petrossian (LTP) that held an unauthorized rally on September 26 at which LTP appeared.

¶12. (C) Forty-four years old, Gagik Beglarian, or "Chorniy Gago" (Black Gago) as he has been pejoratively nicknamed in reference to his reputed underhanded business dealings as the prefect of Yerevan's most affluent district, was elected Kentron prefect in 2002 and 2005. Beglarian previously served in the Armenian Parliament in 1993 and in 2006 joined the ruling Republican Party and became a member of its executive board. Beglarian reportedly has an extensive range of interests in Kentron's affluent business community and in the numerous construction projects currently underway in his district. He actively supported Serzh Sargsian's presidential bid in 2008, when it was reported that people in

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his entourage, including bodyguards, engaged in election fraud and violence against opposition proxies.

¶13. (C) Forty-five years-old, LTP ally Ararat Zurabian has served as the Chairman of the Armenian National Movement (ANM) since 2002. During the 1990s the ANM was the ruling party of then-President Ter-Petrossian, but following LTP's ouster in 1998 the party lost members in droves to other parties, and the remainder fractured into several rival opposition parties. The ANM has never recaptured the national prominence it once had. In 1996-1999 Zurabian served as Kentron prefect himself, and is reported to own one business downtown, a cafe located in Yerevan's Opera (aka Freedom) Square. As one of LTP's principal campaign lieutenants in the presidential election, Zurabian was arrested March 10 on charges of inciting "mass disorders" and "usurpation of power." He was released from jail on his own recognizance in June after undertaking not to leave the country and being hospitalized for heart problems. The charges against him remain pending. The parliamentary commission tasked to investigate March 1 events also appealed

to law enforcement authorities to free Zurabian pending trial.

¶14. (C) Campaign officials for Zurabian said on September 29 that Zurabian refuses to concede defeat in light of the wide-scale fraud witnessed during the election, and that his campaign is preparing to submit proof of their allegations to the Prosecutor General's Office. Zurabian's office also maintained that none of Yerevan's 20 or so TV stations would run his pre-election campaign ads, claiming they had been pressured by the authorities not to do so. (COMMENT: The morning of the election Poloff walked five blocks of one of the main streets of the Kentron district where he saw approximately 25 Zurabian posters either all defaced or covered by an anti-smoking ad which lacked any disclosure as to its source. In contrast, Beglarian campaign photos graced scores of upscale shop windows in the same area, none of which had been tampered with, and all of which had been placed inside the windows. END COMMENT.)

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Kentron's election represented the most high-profile poll in Armenia since the disputed February presidential election, one of the first polls in recent memory that the CEC accredited our emboffs to observe. If the authorities had a single opportunity to showcase their public commitments to restoring democratic momentum, this was it. Instead, Armenian authorities took advantage of the relatively lower scrutiny of lightly-observed local elections to practice their complete playbook of dirty election maneuvers and re-install a thuggish, corrupt party boss to the position. However, the opposition also missed an opportunity by nominating Ararat Zurabian, who -- though distinctly less unpopular than the infamous Chorniy Gago -- is not well liked by Yerevantsi for his custodianship of the city center during the Yerevan's "cold, dark years" of dire economic privation in the 1990s. Had the opposition chosen a truly popular and charismatic candidate instead of the grey mediocrity Zurabian, it might have raised some real popular enthusiasm for the race and made the authorities' efforts to steal the election that much harder to get away with.
YOVANOVITCH